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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITION CONCERNED BY DEMOCRATIC
BACKSLIDING

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a series of separate meetings, the leaders of Azerbaijan's "big three" opposition parties - Musavat, the Popular Front Party, and the Azerbaijan Liberal Party - shared their concerns over Azerbaijan's political situation. Severe restrictions on media freedom and freedom of assembly topped each leader's concerns, and each expressed frustration with the political environment, saying that it is becoming increasingly difficult for their parties to operate. All three warned of growing Russian influence in Azerbaijan. While public rhetoric from the opposition since the November 2005 Parliamentary Elections has accused the international community of not doing enough to promote democracy, leaders of two of the parties told us that they understand building democracy in Azerbaijan is the responsibility of the Azerbaijani people. These leaders, like their ruling-party counterparts, already appear to be strategizing for the October 2008 Presidential Elections. END SUMMARY.

MUSAVAT PARTY

¶2. (C) Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar noted the disturbing trends in media freedom and freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan. He said that the biggest problem facing the country is the lack of public trust in the political process. According to Gambar, elections in Azerbaijan are still not fair or free, and the Embassy's statement after the November 2005 Parliamentary Elections "encouraged the Aliyev regime." Gambar noted deterioration in all areas of democracy, and said that although building democracy in Azerbaijan is the responsibility of the Azerbaijani population, he feels that the U.S. is not active enough in promoting democratic reform. He said that the level of corruption is not decreasing, and the influx of oil money will not improve citizens' lives, only strengthening the capacity of the ruling power.

¶3. (C) According to Gambar, as a result of democratic backsliding, the Azerbaijani people are losing trust in the West, and are becoming increasingly hesitant to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration. He said that people are even more untrusting of the GOAJ, but are afraid to voice their opinions. Gambar emphasized that Azerbaijan is "following the Russian model," resulting in a situation in which the public will accept any GOAJ decision. For example, Gambar noted that Musavat's Members of Parliament (MPs) have raised a number of important issues in Parliament, but that because of the body's weak role in Azerbaijan, they are unable to impact significant change. Gambar also expressed frustration over government intimidation of the opposition. For example, he said that approximately 40 Musavat members - mostly university professors - had been dismissed from their jobs because of their party affiliation. Gambar concluded with his opinion that the Azerbaijani people trust Musavat, but know

that Musavat "will not be allowed" to take power, so they do not openly show their support. (NOTE: Musavat MP Nasib Nassibli told the Ambassador that Gambar is learning English and wants to spend six months in the U.S. to improve his language skills.)

POPULAR FRONT PARTY

14. (C) Popular Front Party (PFP) and Azadliq bloc Chair Ali Kerimli shared his concern on the recent GOAJ media crackdown. According to Kerimli, the only independent media outlets that remain in Azerbaijan are the Azadliq, Yeni Musavat, and Bizim Yol newspapers, Turan news service, and ANS television station. Kerimli fears that because four out of five of these are located in the Azadliq building, that if they are evicted from this building (pending a decision by the State Property Committee - see reftel), there will be no more independent media in Azerbaijan. Kerimli expressed his frustration that it is already difficult for the Azadliq newspaper to continue operating, because due to the USD 220,000 the newspaper is being fined for seven criminal libel verdicts, Azadliq's bank accounts have been frozen for over a month. Since that time, the newspaper has been printed with private money from party members. Kerimli said that the PFP is willing to pay the AYM 31,000 that the State Property Committee says it owes, but that the PFP wants a written agreement so it does not face a similar situation in the future. He also said that the Baku police are ordering local merchants to stop carrying the newspaper. Kerimli said that because one-third of Azadliq's sales are through merchants, the GOAJ is trying to cut off the paper's "last source of oxygen."

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15. (C) Kerimli said that it is becoming increasingly difficult for PFP to function. According to Kerimli, the party is not able to hold private meetings in Azerbaijan's regions because of local government interference. He said that nine of PFP's leaders have been arrested, and expressed his frustration with the GOAJ's refusal to issue him a passport. Kerimli shared his opinion that Russian influence is becoming much stronger in Azerbaijan, and that he fears the country may end up like Belarus. He said that he has suspicions that Russia is actually behind the media crackdown. At the same time, he continued, because of the lull between elections, Aliyev is taking advantage of the international community's inattention to tighten control. Kerimli said that he understands that the Azerbaijani people are responsible for building democracy in their country, and that he believes the U.S. wants to develop democracy in Azerbaijan, but that the Embassy's methods in doing so were not obvious to the opposition. (NOTE: Embaffs assured Kerimli that democracy promotion remains at the top of the USG's agenda in Azerbaijan.)

AZERBAIJAN LIBERAL PARTY

16. (C) Azerbaijan Liberal Party (ALP) Chair Lala Shovket said that she has noted a "degradation of democracy" in Azerbaijan, and fears the country is transitioning to a regime similar to that of Saudi Arabia or Syria. According to Shovket, the GOAJ "hates the opposition" and is intent on eliminating it altogether before the October 2008 Presidential Elections. She noted particular concern with the restrictions against freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, and said that there is no economic freedom in Azerbaijan. Shovket compared Azerbaijan's current situation to that of Iran in the 1970s. She said that at that time, Iran's economic growth was among the highest in the world, as Azerbaijan's is becoming; that religion was replacing democracy, as she feels is happening in Azerbaijan; and that the Shah's family allocated oil revenue to a charitable foundation in his name, which she compared to First Lady

Mehriban Aliyeva's work with the Heydar Aliyev Foundation.
(Note: Other opposition members have recently made remarks comparing Azerbaijan to pre-revolutionary Iran, both publicly and privately, including Yeni Siyaset bloc leader Eldar Namazov and Musavat MP - and former Azerbaijani Ambassador to Iran - Nasib Nassibli.)

17. (C) Shovket said that it is becoming increasingly difficult for ALP to function, particularly in Azerbaijan's regions. She said that it is difficult for party members to find work, especially professors, and that many members had been given an ultimatum to leave the party or lose their jobs. Shovket also said that when she travels to the regions, local police prevent her from holding meetings - ostensibly on orders from the ruling-party controlled local government officials. Shovket continued, saying that she does not want to come to power, that she just wants to see democratic and economic improvement in Azerbaijan. She noted that it is "not possible to remove Aliyev from power," but that the international community can push him to "make real changes, not just through words." In addition, although she is concerned with the political situation in Azerbaijan, Shovket said that she is currently more concerned with Georgia's relationship with Russia, which she feels as implications for all of the Caucasus. She noted a clear "Russification" taking place in Azerbaijan, and said that if Georgia prevails in its disputes with Russia - which she said depends on quick NATO accession for Georgia - the "fate of the Caucasus" would be far better.

COMMENT

18. (C) Since the opposition parties left the spotlight after the November 2005 Parliamentary Elections, they have not been major players in Azerbaijan's political process - although Musavat has taken a more constructive role since its split from the Azadliq bloc. Public rhetoric from the opposition since November has been quite critical of the international community's role in Azerbaijan's democratic development, but Gambar's and Kerimli's comments that they understand building democracy is the Azerbaijani people's responsibility marks a welcome change. While Shovket seems to have taken a more back-seat role, Gambar's focus on party-building through USG-funded IRI programs and reported interest in visiting the U.S. to improve his English, and Kerimli's focus on developing his English language skills indicate that they both are thinking ahead to the 2008 Presidential Elections. We will continue to engage with the whole range of parties and encourage their participation in the political process.

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